

Innovation the way forward

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Comment

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INNOVATION is perceived to be the domain of a select few.

Lesser mortals are not meant to innovate.

It is best left to the technical people to "invent" something that is earth-shattering!

This is not necessarily so according to the founding president of the Malaysia Invention and Design Society (MINDS) Professor Tan Sri Augustine S.H. Ong (since 1987).

Formerly known as Malaysia Inventors' Club (MIC), it had to rename itself to avoid confusion with political party Malaysian Indian Congress, which uses the same acronym.

Ong related at a seminar this week a true story that put him on the road to innovation.



Palm oil is better than many existing products on the market.

This was when he had just joined Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) in the early 70s.

Then he had just produced a scientifically important book on the chemistry of "free radicals" with a London publisher.

He had wanted to impress the vice chancellor. Instead he was bluntly asked: "Can't you publish something more useful?"

This came as a shock to him since many scientists had been "indoctrinated" to live by the "publish or perish" maxim.

So what could be more useful than a research-based publication?

After all, success is measured by "citations" -- the number of people who refer to a publication -- or the so-called "impact factor" instead of the "impact" on society which could change the lives of many.

That got the young up-and-coming scientist thinking.

He decided to take his family for a "working" holiday down south while he nursed his injured pride.

Instead he was attracted to the huge hectares of oil palm plantations and that brought about a spark of hope to his somewhat disillusioned mind.

From then on his life as a scientist changed.

He resolved to provide technical and innovative solutions to the economic problems of the nation.

It is not about doing research as a promotional exercise.

He left USM to join Palm Oil Research Institute of Malaysia.

Oil palm plants were then relatively new to Malaysia and they presented numerous issues that had to be creatively dealt with so that they could generate income for the country.

To cut a long story short, Ong and his team were eventually able to upgrade for the first time his lab-based experiments into an industrial one producing more than 3,000 tonnes of palm oil.

That was an indication that his work was about to create impact -- for the common good.

At the same, he was able to live by the "do-or-die" axiom which meant that if he was not able to implement the research that he had carried out successfully, then it would mean a dreadful waste of funds, effort and ideas.

Regardless of the number of times research findings are cited by others, what counts ultimately is how the innovation could be rendered useful to the community.

Unfortunately, this is rarely the case as many inventions never see the light of day.

Despite the innovative successes (compared to Ghana where oil palm originated), there is never a shortage of obstacles.

This time the anti-palm oil lobbyists are on a smear campaign leaving Malaysia's palm oil sector vulnerable.

Worse, many Malaysians tend to believe that "doomsday" for palm oil is already near and they are ready to desert the situation.

The foreigners must be right! Once again, Ong and his team proved them wrong.

Through sheer perseverance, the anti-palm oil campaigners were confronted and convinced that palm oil is not what they want us to believe.

It turns out that it is a better oil than the many existing products on the market.

When the United States agreed to import a large volume of Malaysian palm oil it was a signal that the battle had been won in our favour.

These episodes are among the reasons that motivated Ong to set up MINDS.

He believes that Malaysians are generally innovative and creative, and MINDS is meant to be the platform to launch ideas.

This belief must now be reinforced in an attempt to shape an innovative society for the future.

Until you believe you will not begin to innovate.

And the best way to create the future is through innovation.

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